

# Pragati

The Indian  
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Review

No 7 | Oct 2007

PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY  
IN BURMA AND PAKISTAN

ENGAGING TIMOR LESTE

ENERGY TALK

PROCURING FIGHTER PLANES

TULLY'S PARTING SHOT

## An unwise excavation

THERE ARE BETTER ALTERNATIVES TO SETHUSAMUDRAM

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# Pragati

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## PUBLIC POLICY

# Dredging the Palk Strait

## *Sethusamudram is not a good route to development and strategic security*

NITIN PAI

IT WAS first conceptualised in 1860. Fourteen proposals and 144 years later, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh launched its construction in July 2005. And now, almost suddenly, it has burst onto the national scene as the latest political hot potato.

The central and Tamil Nadu state governments, its current day champions argue that dredging the Palk Strait will boost littoral and international trade, strengthen the capabilities of the Indian navy and even safeguard against tsunamis. Its opponents, of which there are many — Sri Lankans, environmentalists and economists — claim that it will cause irreparable damage to the local ecology and affect the livelihoods of the fishing communities along the coasts of southern India and Sri Lanka. And then came the controversial affidavit (see Page) that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was quick to seize as a political opportunity ahead of the next general elections.

Before the issue of the historicity of the characters in the Ramayana came along to cloud the issue, much of the public debate hovered around political and environmental issues. Neither the commercial viability, nor the putative military strategic benefits, were adequately scrutinised. Let's look at these in turn.

The commercial case for the project rests on the time and cost saved due to a shorter route. The time saving will be most significant for India's domestic littoral trade. If ports on either coast improve their efficiency, bulk cargo and container ships may be able to provide an attractive alternative for domestic freight that currently depends on India's inefficient railways and abominable highways. As for international trade, Indian ports have a long way to go before the canal route can be compelling enough for global shipping companies to consider.

Jacob John points out in a recent issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly*, project benefits are being overstated. "The promises of the project

may be valid for some ships," he concludes, "but there has been a serious deficiency in studying its impact for other ships. This deficiency is likely to make the project economically unviable and more expensive for some ships to use. It is a project that is also likely to cost considerably more than what was originally proposed due to a lack of study on the amount of dredging needed. Given the likely escalation of costs and its extremely limited benefit, there is a need for mechanisms that ensure accountability of the project to its original claims".

The trend in the shipping industry is towards larger ships. The canal, however, will allow only the smaller ships (those less than 20,000 DWT) to pass through. Even these have to slow down to be piloted across the canal.

It is inexcusable for the government to sink public funds into a project of questionable viability without a study of alternative means to achieve the same objectives. For instance, investing in improving highways and domestic gas pipelines can arguably achieve the same economic goals, with much larger external benefits.

What of the strategic security angle then? Sure, the Indian Navy likes it, as it will have greater flexibility in managing its assets across the Eastern and Western seaboard. But the canal straddles the areas controlled by the LTTE, which has a small but lethal sea-borne unit. The Indian coast guard and navy are well capable of securing the canal, but the risk from terrorism cannot be ruled out.

Indeed, analysts like Col R Hariharan (retd) note that the canal "does not add greatly to the strategic security of Indian Ocean Region. It (only) gives tactical advantage in dominating the Sethusamudram region and in keeping coastal shipping routes within Indian waters. During times of war, this will be additional safe supply and trading route. However, even that will require constant surveillance for surface borne threat. It does not however prevent infiltra-



**A better road to development**

tion through covert operations. The stress laid on “strategic importance” of the canal appears to be more to sell the idea to the nation than borne out by facts.”

His views are echoed by Commander GVK Unnithan (ret'd) who contends that “during hostilities no sane naval commander will lead his fleet through a narrow, shallow and long canal for fear of hostile submarine activities”.

Indeed, a government concerned about strategic security would have given thought to alternatives: more ships for the navy to enhance operational flexibility and better equipping the Coast Guard to protect the littoral.

It is possible to bring economic development to coastal Tamil Nadu without having to create another public sector behemoth. It is possible to improve domestic trade by build-

ing better highways and making the railways more efficient. And it is possible to strengthen maritime security by buying more hovercraft and ships for the coast guard and the navy. But if the government goes ahead with the project, it will not be possible to repair the damage it will cause to the environment. That alone should compel the government to explore alternatives than to stubbornly insist on sinking money down the Palk Strait.

*Nitin Pai is editor of Pragati - The Indian National Interest Review*

## GEOLOGY

# Plates, rifts and coral reefs

## *Why the Palk Strait is as it is*

SUVRAT KHER

THE RELENTLESS motion of the earth's tectonic plates is the prime driver of geological processes. About 150 million years ago, the mid-late Jurassic plate motions caused a breakup of the now southern portion of India to form the continental block of Sri Lanka. Such rifting between two land masses causes stretching and down-faulting of the intervening crust, creating topography. Rift zones over time can evolve into an oceanic basin of great depths. However, for complex reasons of plate motions, the rifting between India and Sri Lanka ended prematurely. No deep topography was generated. That is the fundamental reason why the Palk Strait is shallow. In this narrow body of water were deposited sediments over a period of tens of millions of years. During the Pleistocene ice age (1.8 million–12 thousand years ago), massive sea level fluctuations periodically exposed the Palk Strait, connecting India and Sri Lanka with a “land bridge”. As the ice age ended 12 thousand years ago, sea-levels rose again, flooding the Palk Strait. It has been flooded ever since, and has been accumulating sediment to form natural sand shoals. The conditions are conducive for coral growth too, and a great

many coral reef communities have formed in the last few thousand years.

In Indian mythology, Rama on his way to Sri Lanka to rescue his wife Sita, built a causeway across the Palk Strait. The sand islands and the coral reefs used to be considered remnants of that causeway. Modern geological understanding has put that theory to rest. Now, proponents of the causeway say that it was built to bridge the gaps between the natural sand and coral islands and it has since been submerged. No physical evidence of this causeway has ever been found and no serious theory of how such a massive engineering feat could have been accomplished ever been offered. For the past few years a high-altitude, low resolu-

**The level of scientific debate on this topic has been disappointing and reflects the general neglect of the pure sciences over the last few decades.**

tion image captured by a NASA space shuttle which shows a white linear feature connecting India and Sri Lanka has been circulating on the internet. Proponents of Rama's bridge have been quick to point to this as “evidence” of a causeway. But the image is not evidence. Close up views of the Palk Strait show a series of discontinuous islands and

cannot resolve features under the water. The perception of continuity in the low resolution image is an illusion caused due to the suspension of white calcium carbonate sediment.

In July 2007, S Badrinarayanan, former director of Geological Survey of India claimed that the National Institute of Ocean Technology had drilled and recovered cores along the coral island chain and found evidence of boulders. Moreover, the location of the boulders in the sequence of sediments was according to Dr Badrinarayanan very unusual. Boulders of coral rock appeared on top of marine sand.

He interpreted the presence of boulders as evidence of an artificial causeway, since according to him there was no way that these boulders could have formed naturally on top of marine sand. It would have been more convincing if these boulders were found to have been arranged in some sort of linear fashion, but cores cannot tell us that. In any case, this was potential evidence in favour of a man-made structure. But he did not apply an understanding of coral reefs to this problem. As coral reefs grow upwards from the sea bed they encounter shallower water and start getting battered by waves. Particularly during storms, pieces of corals break off from the main reef. It is common for reefs to have an apron of debris composed of small and large boulders sitting on top of the sandy sea floor. Much of the sand in the Palk Strait is being brought by currents from the southern Tamil Nadu coast and the Jaffna peninsula. Over time, sedimentary environments in response to a shift in currents encroach upon and bury an adjoining sedimentary environment. Corals can encroach and bury sand, just as sand can shift and bury adjacent coral and boulders. Over long periods of time such migrating and shifting environments will create a geological section, such as the one observed in the cores, a complex sequence of inter-layered sand, coral and boulders. Dr Badrinarayanan's boulders can be explained using an understanding of coral reef dynamics.

Another persistent misunderstanding has been the story that the bridge was built during a fall in the sea-level which exposed most of the sea bed, leaving only a few deeper

puddles to be bridged. This hypothesis can also be easily rejected using an understanding of Holocene sea-level history. The period of global sea-level rise beginning around twelve thousand years ago marks the beginning of the Holocene epoch. The Palk Strait became deeper as sea-levels rapidly rose in the early part of the Holocene. By the time of the Ramayana which is dated to anywhere from 100 BCE to 3000 BCE, even 5000 BCE by fringe historians, the Palk Strait would have been several meters deep. Moreover, evidence from mid-Holocene coral reef terraces at Rameshwaram—bands of corals growing at different altitudes and hence tracking sea level change—tell us that fluctuations in Holocene sea-level were minor, on the order of few tens of centimetres, not enough to cause any noticeable change in water depth. This would have made causeway-building over a length of about 30 miles in water several meters deep an impossible exercise.

Ram Setu has now moved beyond geology to political opportunism. Nevertheless, the level of scientific debate on this topic has been disappointing and reflects the general neglect of the pure sciences over the last few decades. The media were inevitably ignorant, never going beyond those tiresome uninformative NASA images, never taking the trouble of inviting archaeologists or geologists to speak on this issue. More revealing has been the deafening silence of Indian scientists. Even as their colleagues from the Archaeological Survey of India were suspended by the government, they stood by mute, witnesses to a crime much more serious than the political opportunism of the BJP. Growth in the 21st century will increasingly depend on ours becoming a knowledge economy. Crimes of neglect, censorship and intimidation in our sciences may eventually derail that growth and cost our country dearly.

*Suvrat Kher is a geologist. He divides his time by consulting in geographic information systems, coaching soccer and rugby and blogging on science.*

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## HISTORY

# Epic problems

## *The Archaeological Survey of India deserves criticism*

JAYAKRISHNAN NAIR

A FEW WEEKS ago, in an affidavit pertaining to the Sethusamudram project, the central government told the Supreme Court that there was no historical evidence to establish the existence of Rama or the other characters in Ramayana. The affidavit was filed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), an organisation under the Ministry of Culture, whose goal is to conduct archaeological research and protect India's cultural heritage. This caused an arc of outrage and a political crisis. To control the political damage, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government withdrew the affidavit and suspended the concerned ASI officials. The ASI deserves criticism, not so much for shielding the Minister for Culture, but for making unwarranted statements about the historicity of Rama.

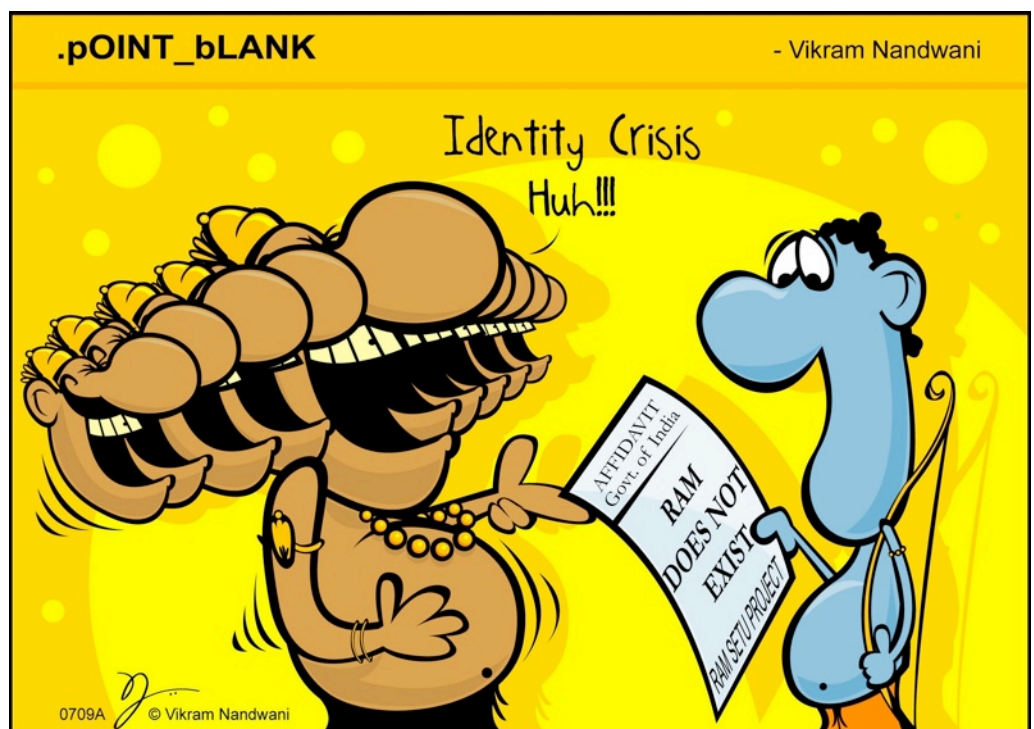
Since the historians of the first century wrote nothing about Jesus, modern day scholars have to rely on the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, which contain stories of miracles to reconstruct the period of early Christianity. Even if you ignore the miracles, the Jewish-oriented Gospel of Matthew, the Gentile-oriented Gospels of Luke and Mark and the non-Synoptic Gospel of John disagree on important aspects of the life of Jesus. The dramatic ascension of Jesus to heaven is not mentioned by Mark, Matthew or John, but only by Luke, and to confuse matters further Luke wrote another book called the Acts of the Apostles which gives a different date for Jesus Christ's ascension.

With all such confusion, instead of dismissing the story of Jesus as a myth, historians look for places mentioned in the gospels, cross reference the texts with other literary works, conduct archaeological studies and try to reconstruct the life of the historical Jesus. Western universities have departments for religious studies which teach disciplinary perspectives on religion and on the history, literature,

thought, and practice of particular religious traditions. In these departments Judeo-Christian scriptures are analysed for historical content. It is on the basis of research that the historicity of religious characters are established.

Epics usually have a seed story which then gets layered with exaggeration, poetic imagination and addition by later scribes. Mahabharata started out with the name Jaya with just 8800 verses by Vyasa. It increased to 24,000 verses when it was recited by Vaisampayana and it reached the size of 100,000 verses when it was recited by Ugrasravas, the son of Lomaharsha. Similarly, the story of the Ramayana grew over time. Theravada Buddhists, for instance, have a version of Ramayana in the Jatakas that does not have the episode of Sita's abduction, which probably implies that the story of Ravana was added later.

In his introductory lecture titled "Call Me Yeshua" on a course on the historical Jesus, Stanford University professor Thomas Sheehan points out that someone attempting to look for history in religious texts has to learn to step out of the symbolism and learn to critique or know the limits of



the phenomena they are studying. Since religious texts evolved over a period of time, he says, it is possible to pull them apart and find the historical events which were the seed. No such work has been done on Ramayana. Yet the ASI has boldly concluded that there is no evidence for Rama's existence.

Indeed, it is not even clear whether the ASI has read what historians have written about the historicity of Rama. A. L. Basham wrote that Rama may have been a chief who lived in the 8th or 7th century BCE who did not have any divine attributes. He went on to write that Rama and Dasaratha were insignificant chieftains, who were ignored by the Puranas, but whose exploits were remembered, elaborated and magnified by bards. Rama's father-in-law, Janaka of Videha, is mentioned a few times in literature and according to Basham, is definitely a historical figure. Romila Thapar, in her book *Early India*, writes that the original Ramayana was an exaggerated version of local conflicts occurring between the expanding kingdoms of the Gangetic plain and the societies of the Vindhyan region.

The Trojan war is an important event in the *Illiad*, the ancient Greek epic poem attributed to the blind Ionian poet Homer. This war was considered mythological till the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, excavated a site in Turkey which he believed was Troy. For the past 16 years more than 350 scholars, scientists and technicians from nearly 20 countries have been collaborating on excavations in this site. There were arguments against associating the ruins with the city described in *Illiad*, but new excavations have changed that view. Archaeologists now believe that the city was very large, of great importance and was attacked repeatedly.

German archaeologist Manfred Korfmann of the University of Tübingen who led the excavations for the past 16 years wrote in *The Archaeology Magazine* that based on the discoveries so far, the conclusion is that there were several armed conflicts in and around Troy at the end of the Late Bronze age. We do not know, however, if some of these conflicts were distilled into the Trojan war or if there was a single memorable war. He is sure that Homer should be taken seriously and his story is based on the memory of historical events.

Biblical archaeology has led to the discovery of structures like the Pool of Siloam, Second Temple, Shechem temple, Jericho's walls and artifacts like Ebla cuneiform archives, Arad ostraca, and Caiaphas family ossuaries. If the

story of Jesus had been dismissed as a myth, none of this would have happened.

When it comes to supporting such research, the ASI has a mixed track record. A few years ago, Jagmohan, then the minister of culture, started an effort to conduct archaeological studies along the path of the Ghaggar-Hakra River. This river is believed by many to be the mythical Saraswati river

**In the West, Judeo-Christian scriptures are analysed for historical content. It is on the basis of research that the historicity of religious characters are established.**

mentioned in the Vedas and archaeology would have illuminated the debate. The excavations at Adi Badri in Haryana revealed a 300 AD Kushan site and excavations in Dholavira in Kutch revealed one of the world's oldest stadiums and signboards. For some time after the UPA government took over, it appeared that the project had been scrapped. But recent reports that it has been revived under a different name.

The ASI has been conducting underwater excavations near the present-day Dwaraka and the island of Bet Dwaraka places associated with Krishna. The expeditions have revealed that the debris found under water in Dwaraka are the ruins of a city dated to 2280 BCE. The ASI has also conducted excavations in Hastinapur and Kurukshetra, both mentioned in the Mahabharata. There has, however, been very little archaeology related to Ramayana. S. R. Rao, former director of National Institute of Oceanography, who was responsible for the underwater archaeology near Dwaraka believes that Ramayana should be dated at least to 3000 BCE or earlier based on the archaeological finds in Hampi which he contends is the Kishkindha of Ramayana.

Mythologized histories are not easy to study unlike straightforward histories. This does not mean that they cannot be studied with a view to extract historical information. Instead, without any historical, archaeological, and philological study of Ramayana, the ASI has concluded that Rama was not a historical figure. For an organisation that claims to be scientific, the ASI has failed to research and examine data, come up with facts and then make a judgement. This lapse compounds what might otherwise have been described as a faux pas—for the ASI could well have stated its position on the Sethusamudram canal without having to pass a verdict on religious matters.

*Jayakrishnan Nair writes about history, archaeology and current affairs at [Varnam.org/blog](http://Varnam.org/blog).*

## ENERGY SECURITY

# Talking to Tom James

*...about energy markets, alternative fuels and clean energy*

ARUNA URS

Professor Tom James has been involved in energy markets since 1989, and in early 2006 he was appointed Professor of Natural Gas Markets at India's University of Petroleum & Energy Studies. In a recent conversation, Aruna Urs picked his brain on carbon trading, energy markets and the energy scene in India.

**In your latest book, *Energy & Emissions Markets: Collision or Convergence* (John Wiley, 2006, 350 pages), you have labelled the Kyoto Protocol as a market failure, mainly due to the absence of the United States and Australia. However, in the last section of the book, you call for a truly global carbon trading mechanism. How confident are you about this scenario?** Tom James: The big irony here is that the US has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol even though it was the first one to propose it in the late '80s and early '90s. Individual states like California continue to move along the lines of Kyoto even as the US federal government abstains from joining the protocol. Having said that, the American government is becoming progressively aware of the issue of global warming and its fallout. The US is now looking at how to link their domestic trading system with the European Union Emission Trading Scheme. It is also trying to bring on board other countries such as Australia, China and India.

**What is India's responsibility in the current global warming debate?** The main responsibility of the Indian government is to regulate its own environment for the betterment of its people. No one country can force the other to hold back its economic development for the sake of global environment. When the West industrialised, it did not have option of clean technologies that are available now. The question then is should India tread the same path as the West?

Countries like China that took the conventional path are now facing massive problems in preserving their environment. Technologies to reduce greenhouse gases are readily available these days, but the cost factor has desisted devel-

oping countries from employing them. In this scenario, trading carbon units under Kyoto Protocol could be used to partially fund these projects. A good example here is the British Petroleum's Peterhead Hydrogen project in UK. BP converts natural gas into CO<sub>2</sub> and hydrogen. While hydrogen is used for power generation, CO<sub>2</sub> is transported and pumped underground to enhance oil recovery in ageing oil fields. The debate is still open on whether this project would generate carbon credits but what is certain is that India could benefit from projects like these for the ageing oil fields along its extensive coastline.

**What is the government's role here? Are markets the only way to cut carbon emission?** Emissions trading schemes do work. We have seen genuine reduction in emissions, particularly the CO<sub>2</sub>, after the EU Emission Trading Scheme started in 2005. However, this is not a naturally de-

**About 25% to 30% of the LNG market is the merchant market—ships carrying the fuel are literally turned in the direction of the highest bidder at a short notice.**

veloped market but one that is a product of policy and hence there are bound to be some sticky issues. For example, in the first year of the scheme, these countries were allotted high credit points, but these issues have been taken care of now.

Most governments are good at seeing the large picture. But it is next to impossible for them to micro-manage every company's emissions. More importantly, they also have to make sure that jobs are not being cut along with emissions. The trading mechanism delivers both. Companies which are in a better position to cut emissions will go ahead as there is an incentive for them to do so while those who cannot reduce emissions will have to pay a price for it. Regardless of who cuts where and by how much, the final goal is met. Governments should set targets and let the industry micro-manage the implementation process. However, state funds should not be spent on subsidising the upgrade of industrial technology. It should rather be spent on funding R&D of new technologies especially at the University level. One point worth bearing attention is that the cap and trade



scheme can become less useful when households become the single largest group of polluters, as is the case in Japan. Japan has been trying to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions but has not been successful because of this very reason. This is the main cause for Japan being one of the biggest regular buyers of credits under the Kyoto Protocol setup.

**Is it time for India to have its domestic carbon trading market?** Such a market is not needed at this juncture. The domestic carbon trading market is essentially a cap and trade market where the government sets the limit on emissions. It is a little too early for the Indian government to start capping emission levels. But as industrial effluence and city smog are on the rise, it is a good time to start the discussion on the threshold at which India should start reversing its emissions.

**Talking about emissions, India can't breathe without coal...** India has billions of tonnes of coal reserves but most of it is of low grade or what we call "dirty coal". The tendency to go for old coal-based power plants should not be encouraged. Coal-bed methane, Coal Gas and Liquefied coal are much cleaner and efficient. I know that SASOL of South Africa is working closely with the Indian government on the use of liquefied coal as automobile fuel. Using technology being implemented by British Petroleum (BP) in the United Kingdom you can now strip out unwanted gases and emissions from the coal gas creating valuable emission reductions again and highly efficient power generation compared to simple coal fired generation.

**What is your take on the Iran-Pakistan-India oil pipeline?** Well, this issue passed on from one petroleum minister to another to yet another for several years. I have heard different arguments about this. Cross-border pipeline, for any country, is more a political rather than an energy issue. How stable would the pipeline flowing through a volatile region be is anyone's guess. Countries have to diversify both its suppliers as well as type of supplies; this is the key to energy security. For example – The UK has become an energy dependent from an energy independent country in the past one-and-a-half years. UK now has pipeline after pipeline bringing Russian gas. To reduce dependence, it is now building new infrastructure to pump gas from Scandinavian countries.

**Have big natural gas suppliers over-sold their commitments?** Recent media reports suggest that Russia and Iran are over-estimating their gas reserves. How competitive is the international (liquified natural gas) LNG market? The market is fairly competitive. About 25% to 30% of the market is what is known as the merchant market---ships carrying the fuel are literally turned in the direction of the highest bidder at a short notice.

As far as short-to- medium-term situation is concerned, I do not foresee a supply problem. However, the scenario can change drastically over the next 15-20 years as China and other developing countries add significant LNG landing terminals. The problem that India may likely face in the fu-

ture is with regards to the import of rich LNG that it would require for its diversified needs. As other emerging economies require the same type of LNG, this segment of the market would likely become even more competitive.

**How competitive is the domestic gas market?** In Europe, several years of liberalisation has not made the gas market efficient. We are seeing a second round of deregulation process to make it more competitive. Some countries are experiencing difficulties in regulating even a single operator! In India, GAIL, Reliance and others are building their own pipelines. I do foresee an integration problem in future as these pipelines will carry different types of gases.

**What are your views on uranium futures recently launched by NYMEX. Will a speculative market make investment in uranium-based reactors risky for countries?** I think it is a good thing. Many countries are planning to go nuclear for civilian purposes. The new generations of nuclear reactors are much safer and more efficient. For many years, exploration and mining of uranium had been neglected. The decommissioned warheads were the main source fuel but that inventory is also running out. The higher prices now seen for uranium ore is encouraging the private sector to tap into exchanges such as London's AIM stock market for funding of exploration and mining of Uranium.

**What about Jatropa and ethanol? Will they match the hype?** Jatropa is the best hope for India and the rest of the world in terms of bio-fuels in my opinion. This fuel, however, needs to be improved further for it to work in colder climates. India has rightly banned ethanol production from food crops otherwise we would witness a future where we might have cars to drive but nothing to eat. With regards to sugarcane-based ethanol, I am not excited about it. Cane farming is resource-intensive: it requires fertile land, plenty of water, electricity for irrigation, manpower and fertilisers. Jatropa, on the other hand needs none of the above. Relying on cane-based ethanol does not really diversify energy sources as fertilisers like urea are derived from hydrocarbons, for instance, for the imported LNG.

**Lastly, what are your comments on our commodity exchanges?** I advised all my students to get into the commodities market if they have that option. As India is one of the largest producer and consumer of all types of commodities, it needs a strong commodities derivatives market to manage and mitigate risks. For this to happen, the government has to permit foreign institutional investors (FII) to operate in the market. This will increase the depth of the market besides ensuring job creation and significant knowledge transfer. Recently, there are lots of rumours floating about an offshore exchange in Mauritius. The domestic exchanges will lose their shine once the bulk of the market moves offshore. It is very difficult to bring the market back once it moves offshore. The government needs to act swiftly.

*Aruna Urs is a research analyst with a private risk consultancy firm.*

## Essential readings of the month

### One India plan

[URBAN] GROWTH and rural growth aren't distinct and separate phenomena. Our study suggests that a 100-rupee increase in urban consumption could lead to an increase in rural household incomes of up to 39 rupees -- no small feed-back, and a strong counter to the popular perception of "two Indias." If India's cities keep growing at their current pace, in aggregate 6.3 million nonfarm jobs in rural areas (more than the total number of new professional services jobs projected over the next 10 years) and \$91 billion in real rural household income could be created over the next decade. Urban consumption also generates nonfarm employment. A 10% increase in urban expenditure is associated with a 4.8% increase in rural nonfarm employment.

These trends matter, given that arguably India's most serious challenge in the coming years is to find employment for semi-skilled labor. Clearly, agricultural growth -- even envisaging improved productivity -- will not sustain the rural economy on its own. It's the urban-rural linkages -- if understood properly -- that could provide a way to solve India's semi-skilled employment crisis. India's cities are not growing independently of the rest of the country. They are actually helping to pull the countryside out of poverty. It's time to stop talking about "two Indias" and to start making economic policy for one country.

- Roopa Purushothaman, *Myth of the rural-urban divide*, Wall Street Journal, republished in Mint, 6 Sep 2007

### The traitor

IT WAS only a whisper, but it was enough to put Pakistan's military ruler in a dangerously foul mood. At a recent dinner party, one of President Pervez Musharraf's senior officers leaned in close to him and muttered a few words... "Give up your command."

Gen Musharraf's reaction to quiet aside from his trusted officer, however, shows how passionately he intends to defend his dual role as President and army chief, and helps to explain why observers are predicting turmoil in the coming months.

"Gentlemen," Gen. Musharraf said, raising his voice and hushing

the room, according to a guest. "We have a traitor among us"

He grabbed the sleeve of the officer who had spoken to him and hoisted his arm up like a victorious boxer, identifying him to the gathering of military commanders.

- Graeme Smith, *The general's dilemma: civilian dress or civil unrest*, The Globe and Mail, 3 Sep 2007

### On naval encirclement

[THE] CHINESE continuously look over their shoulders to ensure that they balance the Indian Navy with the Pakistan Navy. Talk of China feeling "encircled" is nothing but dialectic disinformation; we have no presence whatsoever in the Pacific.

At the same time, India is in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and that is where China has implemented its "string of pearls" strategy by creating right around us what are best described as "weapon-client states": Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan. In this context, Gwadar, situated at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, is probably the first in a chain of ports that China is developing in our neighbourhood, and which could provide future facilities to its ships and missile-carrying nuclear

- Adm Arun Prakash (retd), *China's naval gazers*, Indian Express, 5 Sep 2007

### Out of first base?

INDIA is likely to be evicted from its sole, albeit fledgling, overseas military facility at Ayni air base near Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe under pressure from Russia, which is concerned over New Delhi's burgeoning ties with Washington.

Senior military officials said the emerging possibility of India looking to Washington and other Western suppliers for military hardware was responsible for Russia "leveraging" its considerable influence with Tajikistan to try and terminate New Delhi's "loose arrangement" regarding Ayni if it declined to be "co-operative".

The Indian Air Force (IAF) [was to transfer] some of its assets to Ayni as part of India's move to augment its "strategic reach" in a troubled area and to secure its galloping energy needs from the resource rich Central Asian Region.

Military planners also consider Ayni air base as a "limited, yet significant" platform to inject Special Forces into a hostile region in response to any emerging threat from the volatile Afghanistan-Pakistan arc.

Ayni also serves as a conduit for India to funnel aid to war-torn Afghanistan as access via the shorter overland route via Pakistan is prohibited by Islamabad.

"This (Russian pressure) appears to be a ploy for more concessions and indulgence from India," a senior military officer associated with the Central Asian Region said. Its Moscow's way of telling New Delhi not to "stray" into the American military hardware camp, the official told IANS.

- India faces eviction from Tajik military base, Sify News, 20 Sep 2007

### Contingency plans for Burma

IF THE junta unexpectedly collapses, an international force should be quickly mobilised to fill the security vacuum and restore peace. India (a top provider of United Nations peacekeepers), along with several Asean nations, would be prime candidate to provide the police and soldiers necessary to restore order in a UN-sanctioned mission. The US Navy in the Pacific demonstrated its immense capacity following the tsunami disaster of 2004 and could be deployed in similar fashion, in support of either a UN mission or a more rapid humanitarian response.

While installing Nobel Prize laureate Ms Suu Kyi as the leader of the Burmese people might appear an elegant solution to the international community, her small and oppressed NLD party has no governing experience or technocrats, and she would be inheriting a dysfunctional bureaucracy loyal to the generals. Establishing a functioning civilian government in Burma will require sustained international attention, long after the monks have returned to their monasteries.

- Drew Thompson, *The world must respond to Burma*, Financial Times, 26 Sep 2007

### Energy interests in Burma

IN 2004 ONGC Videsh Ltd (10%) and GAIL (20%) participated in gas exploration and development deal

along with Daewoo (60%) and Myanmar Oil and Gas Company (10%) in the shallow blocks of A1 and A3.

But even before the signing of the gas purchase deal, India began dreaming of a pipeline through Bangladesh. Bangladesh, however, demanded the moon and dragged the negotiations on for over a year. Meanwhile the junta signed an MOU with Petrochina.

At this time, ONGC Videsh has signed production sharing contracts to develop three deep-water blocks of AD-2, AD-3 and AD-4. It has 5 years for exploration and can take a share in production for 20 years after the find. This sounds much better than A-1 and A-3 deal where it was only exploration and development

India proposed four alternatives: A pipeline via North Eastern states; an undersea pipeline bypassing Bangladesh; shipping compressed natural gas (CNG) by tankers; or shipping liquified natural gas (LNG) by tankers. The land pipeline through the North East has not been received well by locals and Bangladesh. India's sea borders in the region are not yet demarcated for any undersea pipelines. This leaves CNG or LNG as the realistic options.

Any democratically elected government will have to honour its commitments. They can't run away from their neighbours who are also large customers..

It was the rise in consumer gas prices that triggered the current protests. Any future government will have to keep the gas prices artificially low to hold on to power. International donors might give aid but will surely not foot the gas bill. In this scenario, Myanmar will have to sell gas to bigger consumers like India and China in order to subsidize its citizens.

- Aruna Urs, *Getting gas without the junta*, The Acorn, 27 Sep 2007

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## DEFENCE PROCUREMENT

# The making of the order

## *The first of a two-part series on India's multi-role fighter aircraft acquisition*

JOE KATZMAN

"IT'S THE biggest fighter aircraft deal since the early 1990s," says Boeing's Mark Kronenberg, who runs the company's Asia Pacific business. What began as a lightweight fighter competition to replace India's shrinking -21 interceptor fleet has bifurcated into two categories and two expense tiers.

That trend got a boost in March

2006, with a surprise pullout by France's Dassault on the eve of the Request For Proposals (RFP). As a result, the Mirage 2000 v5 is no longer in the fray, despite the fact that India already flies 40 Mirage 2000Ds and its senior officials have touted standardisation as a plus factor. So, what's going on?

In a word, lots. The participants changed, India's view of its own needs is changing, and the nature of the order may be changing as well – but with the release of the official \$10 billion RFP, the competition can begin at last.

The original intent of India's fighter purchase was to replace hundreds of non-upgraded MiG-21s that India will be forced to retire, with a complementary force of 126 aircraft that would fit between India's high-end Su-30MKIs and its low-end Tejas Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) lightweight fighter. While plans to develop a "fifth generation fighter" in conjunction with Russia have received a lot of press, they are uncertain at best, address a different requirement, and offer no solution to the immediate problem of shrinking



Photo Premshree Pillai

Ten dozen. To go.

squadron numbers as existing aircraft are forced into retirement.

India is a large country, with coverage needs over a wide area and on several fronts. One of which is Pakistan, whose JF-17 Thunder joint fighter program with China has India's attention.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) currently has around 30-32 squadrons worth of service-

able aircraft. This is well below the target of 39 1/2. About 21 squadrons currently fly MiG-21s of one vintage or another, and overall squadron strength is projected to plunge to 27 during the 2012-2017 period.

Lightweight multi-role fighters that could make up for declining aircraft numbers with broader and better capabilities would appear to fit that need, and India's initial shortlist followed that template. The Mirage 2000 and MiG-29 were already in service with India in this role, and the JAS-39 Gripen offered a 4th generation aircraft whose costs and profile place it firmly in the lightweight fighter category. These aircraft served as a hedge against the potential failure of the Tejas project, and also offered a more immediate solution to boosting numbers as existing MiG-21s and MiG-23s/MiG-27s were forced into retirement.

Since those early days, sharply improved relations with the United States have introduced a pair of American planes into the competition, and India's view of its own needs is changing. Official sources told Jane's in February 2006 that



RFPs would be issued to France's Dassault (Mirage 2000-5 and Rafale), BAE/Saab (JAS-39 Gripen), EADS/BAE (Eurofighter Typhoon), The American firms Lockheed (F-16 Block 70) and Boeing (F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet), and Russia's Rosonboronexport (MiG-29OVT with thrust vectoring, or

## India's defence procurement process is definitely a game for the patient, and this was no exception: this RFP caps a process that began in 2001

MiG-35). That proved to be the case.

India's requirements are also changing. For instance, both Jane's Defence Weekly and Defense Industry Daily have covered India's wish to 'significantly' augment its strike capability and range to deal with out-of-area contingencies. This delayed the MRCA RFP. Another contributor to these delays has been the need to refine and clarify the new industrial offset rules introduced in 2005, amidst lobbying by American defence firms.

Despite India's need to replace large numbers of aircraft, the competitors have now spread well beyond lightweight fighters and into mid-high end, twin-engine aircraft. The Rafale, Super Hornet, and Eurofighter carry flyaway costs in the \$70-120 million per plane range, with total program costs significantly higher than that as integration, spares, and training are added. Given this change, a split of the order between these high-expense platforms and a cheaper lightweight fighter contender has been mentioned as a possibility. Time will tell.

India's defence procurement process is definitely a game for the patient, and this was no exception. The Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) RFP caps a process that began in 2001, when the IAF sent out its request for information (RFI) for 126 jets. After delays lasting almost 2 years beyond the planned December 2005 issue date, India's Ministry of Defence finally announced a formal Request for Proposal (RFP) on August 28th this year.

The RFP announcement estimated the program at 126 Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA), at a cost of Rs. 42,000 crores (about \$10.24 billion as of the RFP date, or about \$81.3 million per fighter). The 211-page document includes clauses for initial purchase, transfer of technology, licensed production, and life-time maintenance support for the aircraft. Under the terms of purchase, the first 18 aircraft will come in a 'fly away' condition, while the remaining 108 will be manufactured under Transfer of Technology. Some reports add an option for an additional 64 aircraft on the same terms, bringing the total to 190 aircraft; DID is attempting to confirm this.

The vendors now have 6 months to submit their proposals. Selection will involve an exhaustive evaluation process as detailed in the Defence Procurement Procedures (DPP) – 2006. First, submitted proposals will be technically evaluated by a professional team to check for compliance with

IAF's operational requirements and other RFP conditions. Extensive field trials would be carried out to evaluate the performance. Finally, the commercial proposal of the vendors, short-listed after technical and field evaluations, would be examined and compared. The defence ministry's

Contract Negotiation Committee (CNC) would then hold discussions with the vendors before identifying the manufacturer whose bid is the best, and submit its report to the defence minister, who would forward it to the finance minister.

After the file returns to the defence ministry, it goes for final approval to the cabinet committee on security (CCS).

The entire selection process is likely to take at least 2 1/2 years, followed by lengthy price negotiations, and probably including delays along the way. Most observers believe that delivery of any aircraft before 2013 is unlikely.

The vendor who finally wins the competition would also be required to undertake 50% offset obligations in India, a boost from the usual 30% under India's recently revised procurement rules for purchases over \$70 million. India is looking for a large boost to its aerospace and defense electronics industries from this effort, and the RFP release adds that "Foreign vendors would be provided great flexibility in effecting tie up with Indian partners for this purpose." It also says that:

"The aircraft are likely to be in service for over 40 years. Great care has been taken to ensure that only determinable factors, which do not lend themselves to any subjectivity, are included in the commercial selection model. The selection would be transparent and fair...."

It may be recalled that the Defence Minister Shri A K Antony while chairing the Defence Acquisition Council Meeting on June 29, 2007 had outlined three guiding principles for this procurement scheme.

First, the operational requirements of IAF should be fully met. Second, the selection process should be competitive, fair and transparent, so that best value for money is realised. Lastly, Indian defence industries should get an opportunity to grow to global scales."

These days, even American competitions are increasingly finding themselves beset by quasi-legal challenges of evaluation methods, and even of their chosen criteria. Indian competitions have featured these sorts of post-contract obstacles even more consistently, with the addition of bureaucratic delays and corruption charges thrown into the mix. Time will tell if the objectives of the MoD's RFP are met, or if a process of waiting almost 6 years for an RFP, and then years more for a winner, is only the beginning of the process.

Even as India's existing fighter fleet continues to wear out, and China and Pakistan's fleets continue to grow.

*Joe Katzman is The Editor-In-Chief at Defense Industry Daily (DID), a trade publication for the global defense industry. Reprinted with permission.*



Photo: Racoles

## BURMA

# What next for the Saffron revolution?

*Democracy might still be some distance away*

TARA HORN

WHEN BURMA'S military junta increased fuel prices by as much as 500 percent without warning on August 15th, it set in motion a chain of historic events that have grabbed the world's attention. In a country where the government regularly makes economic policy decisions capriciously and without regard for the peoples' welfare, few could have predicted that the price hike would be the tipping point for a beleaguered populace, eventually leading to thousands of demonstrators taking to the streets.

The protests began sporadically in August, with student leaders and National League for Democracy (NLD) members leading the call for a rollback in fuel prices. These led to arrests and tortures. Buddhist monks first joined in the pro-

tests in Akyab, but it was Pakkoku that proved pivotal. After a demonstration in Pakkoku ended with soldiers firing warning shots and assaulting several monks, the nationwide protests quickly snowballed into what has now been dubbed the 'Saffron Revolution'.

Initially demanding a rollback in fuel prices, the monks also began demanding the junta apologise for the events in Pakkoku, release all political prisoners, and engage in dialogue with democratic forces in order to resolve the difficulties facing the people of Burma. The demands were co-ordinated by the All Burma Monks Alliance, which gave the junta a deadline of September 17th to comply, or face ex-communication. In the devoutly Buddhist nation a threat of



excommunication—the refusal of alms from anyone associated with the military government—is not to be underestimated. Since the deadline passed, monks have led daily demonstrations with as many as 100,000 participants flooding the streets in some towns.

The prospect of a revolution has kept Burma watchers on the edge of their seats, although the gravity of the situation seems to have precluded many from speculating on what the ultimate outcome might be. What is clear to everyone though, is that the events now unfolding in Burma are historic, and good or bad, will have far-reaching implications for Burma's future development. The comparisons to the 8-8-88 uprising in which thousands of demonstrators were killed are unavoidable. Many speculated that this current uprising would be different—with monks at the forefront, the junta would surely not risk enflaming tensions by firing on revered clergy, and unlike 1988, the world is now watching the events as they unfold. But already the worst fears are being realised, with as many as 10 monks and laypeople having been killed by soldiers in the last few days, and hundreds of monks being rounded up from their monasteries and arrested. It is easy to forget that monks also led the tragic protests in 1988.

So what's next for Burma and the Saffron Revolution?

Images of thousands of monks marching in defiance, and a glimpse of Aung San Suu Kyi greeting protesters has built expectations that

regime change may be attainable. But with a firmly entrenched military employing hundreds of thousands of people, and democratic opposition parties that have been beset by years of arrests, death, and exile, the practicalities of an overnight revolution could prove too complicated to be sustainable. Many in Burma and abroad are well aware of this, and harbour a small hope of international intervention, an international peacekeeping force to maintain stability during a transition to a civilian government. The truth is, though, that this scenario will remain as little more than a fairy tale for those wanting change. It would take nothing short of a massacre, and then some, to prompt any response stronger than rebukes and sanctions from foreign governments, and even then, such a response is unlikely.

While US President Bush is calling for international sanctions and condemning the junta, it is a safe bet that Washington will not take any action that might entail a risk to the

United States. While sanctions might send a message of support to protesters, they will likely do little to influence the regime's actions in the coming days.

Perhaps the best we can hope for now is a change in leadership within regime. Although not for the better, protests in 1988 led to General Ne Win's resignation and the rise of the dictatorship's current incarnation, the State Peace and Development Council. There is no doubt that the junta will continue to use violent force to crack down on protests; the current leadership has little capacity to deal with situation in any other way, and they have already made their stance clear. While the Burmese military seems to pay little attention to foreign condemnations, they are concerned about internal legitimacy and their image as the only force holding the nation of Burma together. The relatively moderate elements within the military are likely to recognise this situation for what it is—an opportunity to overthrow the current leadership and save face for the military as an organisation by diffusing the conflict with minimal bloodshed, while still holding on to power.

*The Asia Sentinel* reported on September 26th that cracks are showing in the military leadership and that some regional commanders refused to attack the monks. Even as

troop deployments in Akyab continue, local authorities conceded to monks' early demands by selling rice to the public at reduced prices and releasing two men imprisoned for distributing wa-

ter to demonstrating monks.

China's current relationship with Burma, though, may prove more influential than any other single factor. Albeit in an understated way, China has called on the junta to practice restraint, and consider negotiations and reconciliation as a way to ensure stability in the country. As escalating violence continues to irritate the junta's biggest ally, an internal military coup becomes all the more likely. A change in leadership certainly won't be the satisfying victory people are hoping for, but even a revolution would only be a baby step on a long road of reconciliation and rebuilding in Burma. The real question is, how many more people will have to sacrifice their lives for hope of something better?

*Tara Horn—who worked with Burmese refugees in Thailand and Malaysia—is news editor for Narinjara News and director of the Books for Burma project*



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PAKISTAN

# That horse called democracy

*The stakes were always this high*

MANAN AHMED

"THE PAKS were completely out of Practice on Election Procedures," quoted a State Department Telegram sent from Rawalpindi to Washington D.C. in September, 1970. It is left to the historians to expand on the irony that the quote came from General Yahya Khan, the Chief of Army Staff and Military Dictator of Pakistan.

Gen Yahya famously oversaw the first democratic election in Pakistan's history in 1970, and, unhappy with the results, infamously tried to nullify it, an act that led to the separation of East Pakistan in 1971.

With another, nominal, election slated for October 6th, 2007, it might be worth taking a short look at the reverberation of that fateful election and the path it charted for that young nation. In the aftermath of the 1971 secession, the Pakistani state and society underwent a radical re-examination of its foundational framework; the nation-state willed into being explicitly for Muslims had torn itself asunder through fraternal and internecine violence. Suddenly halved, Pakistan turned its gaze towards Western Asia—towards the Muslim world—and began a realignment process that manifested its full glory when Nawaz Sharif was exiled to Saudi Arabia in 1999. This effort at a Pan-Islamic focus for Pakistan's polity also meant a reassessment of Pakistan's history and political structure. The creation of Bangladesh had simultaneously deprived Pakistan of the Hindu minority population, a necessary factor in the secular vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

It is seldom mentioned, if remembered, that it was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who set the agenda of Islamization for Pakistan. To heal the trauma of 1971, he sought to project a global Muslim power for the nation by turning Pakistan towards Pan-Islamism. It was Z. A. Bhutto who, in 1974 at the Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore, declared that Pakistan needed *Nizam-i Mustafa* (The Rule of the Prophet). It was Z. A. Bhutto who, in 1977, declared that Sharia law would be enforced in Pakistan within six months. It was Z. A. Bhutto who purged the word "socialism" from all PPP literature and replaced it with *Musawat-i Muhammadi* (The

Equality of Muhammad). It was Z. A. Bhutto who continued to flaunt a public lifestyle that contradicted his espousal of Islamic principles and gave the religious parties much ammunition for the 1977 elections.

Clearly, Bhutto's zeal for Islam wasn't enough. He was deposed by General Zia ul Haq on July 5, 1977. Gen Zia, a true believer, went immedi-

## Whither Pakistan?

ately on national television and told his nation that "Pakistan, which was created in the name of Islam, will continue to survive only if it sticks to Islam. That is why I consider the introduction of Islamic system as an essential prerequisite for the country."

Gen Zia continued to build upon Bhutto's Islamization. His efforts were undoubtedly hastened after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in neighbouring Iran. To counter a perceived threat from Shi'ite Iran, Gen Zia quickly and deliberately strengthened political and ideological ties with the Saudi regime—creating in Pakistan militant Sunni groups such as Sipah-e Sahaba—and embarked on a wide-ranging program to implement Islamic Sharia in Pakistan. That same year, 1979, saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and within months millions of Afghan refugees had amassed in the cities of Pakistan. It also turned Pakistan into the frontier of the worldwide struggle against Communism and a crucial ally for the United States. To help defeat the Soviets, the United States gladly supported a network of religious warriors housed, trained and equipped in thousands of seminaries across Pakistan. It is a telling fact that there were



Photo: Scott Christian

roughly 200 seminars in 1947 and over 3000 by the end of 1988.

Given this history, one would expect to conclude that “practice” or not, the Pakistani public would be able to identify and elect a pro-Islam agenda when given the opportunity. There have been thirty years of democracy in the 60 year old history of Pakistan—military regimes have been in charge during 1959-1971, 1977-1988, 1999-2007—with national or provincial elections in 1970, 1977, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1997, 2002 and 2005. Yet, even with this history of Islamization amid dictatorial regimes, it is still an eye-opening fact that religious political parties have never been able to attract popular support in Pakistan. During this entire electoral history, religious parties have never won any more than 10% of the seats contested. Though the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal—the alliance of religious parties—did garner more votes than in any previous elections, 16.5%, the gains were swept aside in the 2005 elections.

In our collective analytical and historical eye, Pakistan remains a strangely occluded phantom state. Policy wonks seek only reassurances that it will stem some tide of imminent global destruction—Communism, Nuclear Proliferation, Islamist Extremism. The global aid crowd reads only

the economic indices and the rise or fall of metrics of civil society. The historian compares forever the imagined pasts and the uncertain futures. On this everyone can agree: Pakistan is a society that has rarely, if ever fully, tasted that proverbial fruit of freedom. It operates with severe lacks—some endemic—such as literacy, infrastructure, central government and basic human rights. It is stuck, forever, in the “not yet” time of democratic nations—waiting to “get into practice”.

They say that the stakes have never been as high as they are now. They are wrong. The stakes have always been this high for the people of Pakistan. What they deserve is the ability to make a fair and open choice. What they ask for is the trust and responsibility to make that choice. That religious parties provide one of those choices is not cause enough for us to deny them everything. After all, India emerged that much stronger after the BJP-led governments from 1996-2004.

*Manan Ahmed is a historian of Islam in South Asia. He blogs at Chapati Mystery*

## TIMOR LESTE

# Relations with a new nation

## How far South East is New Delhi prepared to go?

LORO HORTA

LINKS BETWEEN India and Timor date back to the early modern period when traders from the subcontinent reached the island in search of the precious sandalwood. These links grew further as a result of Portuguese colonisation of Timor and parts of India. The search for spices—then a highly prized in Europe—led the Portuguese to establish various garrisoned centres through India to run the lucrative trade and keep potential competitors at bay.

Portugal’s other Asian territories, such as the Flores, Larantuka, Maluku and Timor where administered by the Portuguese Viceroy in Goa, the centre of its Asian empire. In the early 17th century the first Portuguese-trained Goan mis-

sionaries arrived in Timor and played a central role in spreading the Catholic faith through the land.

Indians continued to reach the shores of Timor as soldiers, colonial bureaucrats, missionaries and, in the late 19th century, some came as migrant labourers. These old links have left a permanent mark on Timorese society. A small community of Timorese of Goan descent still exists in independent Timor Leste (East Timor) and many of its members occupying preeminent positions in society. Among the most influential Indo-Timorese are Roque Rodrigues, former minister of defense, and Manuel Longuinhos, the prosecutor general and the country’s only surgeon. Others include senior ecumenical and business families.



With some help from friends...

Since the creation of Timor Leste as an independent country in May 2002 relations between Dili and New Delhi remained sporadic although friendly and cordial. India was the second country to recognise Timor Leste's independence, just a few hours after China (a coincidence perhaps?). Two factors account for the sporadic nature of bilateral ties: distance and more pressing needs on the part of New Delhi, such as consolidating its presence in near Southeast Asia in countries like Vietnam and Burma where perceived Chinese encroachment is taking place. On the part of Dili the same factors have limited the relationship: Timor Leste's foreign policy priorities are focused on ASEAN, Australia and other important extra-regional powers such as Portugal.

However, despite the lack of state-to-state contacts, relations between the two peoples continued to foster. Under the United Nations, two senior Indian diplomats made valuable contributions to the new nation. Ambassadors Kamlesh Sharma and Atul Khare headed the United Nations mission in crucial periods. Ambassador Khare in particular assumed the position of special representative during the worst crisis the young nation ever faced, in early 2006. He has gained the respect of most Timorese as an honest friend of the country. He deserves some credit for the slow, but steady progress towards normalisation now in progress in the fledgling state. Some Timorese have observed

that because Khare is an Indian, a nation that struggled for its freedom, he is able to better understand the Timorese.

With Timor Leste's most urgent foreign policy priorities fulfilled and India's growing engagement with Southeast Asia relations conditions are right to deepen bilateral relations in coming years. In 2004, Jose Ramos Horta, then foreign minister and now president, visited India in an effort to put life into the relations. Since then Indian interest in Timor Leste has been on the rise.

In 2006 Indian oil giant Reliance won two oil exploration blocks in the Timor Sea and further bids are possible. Tata has also sold 400 vehicles for use by the Timorese police and other government agencies. But the main potential lies in the possibility of some Indian companies teaming up with the Kuwait Fund to build major infrastructure projects, such as highways, tunnels, and new air- and seaport facilities. These contracts are believed to be in the order of US\$300 million.

India is also providing scholarships for Timorese students in information technology, but also in agriculture and medicine. Some Timorese public servants have attended capacity building courses in India. The election of Ramos Horta as president in May 2007 may give a certain impetus to bilateral ties as he has been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Indo-Timorese ties. Indeed, India is expected to open an embassy in Dili, Timor to reciprocate in 2009.

Timor Leste has also shown considerable interest in establishing military co-operation with Delhi. The reputation for competence and the untarnished civil-military relations record of the Indian Army is seen as a model to be followed by the troubled Timorese defense force. In fact, just before the recent crisis Defence Minister Rodrigues was planning an official visit to New Delhi to discuss the possibility of Indian assistance in training and other areas.

While Indo-Timorese relations have experienced a slow but steady increase, they still pale when compared with Sino-Timorese ties. Beijing's presence is everywhere to be seen in the island and has intensified since the crisis. China is involved in major infrastructure projects such as the presidential palace and the ministry of foreign affairs. It is also training military officers and civil servants. Beijing seems to have no reluctance to go to the Southern-most corner of Asia.

At what pace will India engage with East Timor? There seems to be a rather disconcerting habit in Indian foreign policy of always arriving after China as in the case of countries such as Angola and Mozambique. How reactive or proactive will Indian foreign policy be towards Timor Leste and the region remains to be seen.

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## BOOK REVIEW

# Mark Tully and India

CHANDRAHAS CHOUDHURY

INDIA CAN be a foreign correspondent's nightmare, very hard to get in its entirety even to those wholly committed to the search. The intense and inimitable peculiarity of India—the residual presence of outdated modes of behaviour and thought from the days of the Raj, or the widely divergent experience of daily life along lines of caste and particularly gender, to take just two examples of how both the near and distant past continue to work on the present—is of course hard to miss for anybody except those totally habituated to it, but it can nevertheless perplex the intellect seeking to break it down into its constituent elements.

From this perspective, the books of Mark Tully are an especially noteworthy contribution to the literature on modern India. Indeed, because he has now spent the best part of four decades in close engagement with the country, because his travels as the BBC's Chief of Bureau have brought him in contact with all kinds of places and people, and because he is part-insider, part-outsider in a productive way, Tully is probably better tuned into India than most Indians, with their limited access to the great sprawl of their own country and its past.

Tully's latest and perhaps last book on his adopted country, *India's Unending Journey*, is a work both off and on the beaten track. This is because, after a series of highly agile, capacious and erudite books about contemporary India, hospitable to all kinds of viewpoints, Tully has in closing written a volume that resembles the traditional "India's message to the world" book customarily written by well-meaning visitors.

In part this is because *India's Unending Journey*—there is something clichéd about the title itself—is the most autobiographical of Tully's books, as also the most polemical. The balance between observed detail and overarching argument is different from that of Tully's previous books, and the writing is more clearly addressed to the western reader. Tully makes a critique of aspects of western life through the lens of India, and thus addresses two constituencies at one go. In some ways he flatters his adopted home at the ex-

pense of the civilisation in which he grew up. Although Tully knows that India itself, with its manifold problems, has yet to find any kind of balance, the argument he extracts from the experience of "forty years of living in India" is how the West itself is now unbalanced, unquestioningly secular and meanly materialist.

In his youth Tully briefly trained to be a priest in the Church of England, and if anything the autobiographical tone of his new book explains why the question of religion, and the place of religion in an increasingly secular climate on the one hand and a radically shrunken world where previously hostile faiths are forced to co-exist on the other, lies at the heart of his work on India. For in India not only is it taken for granted that you believe in God (as a Goan priest tells Tully), in a way that is no longer so in Europe, but also

the other, the stranger, is always in one's field of vision, forcing upon every citizen the imperative of co-existence.

It was in India, writes Tully, that he refined his understanding of religion and came to believe "that a universal God made far more sense rationally than one who limits his activities to

Christians", which is the sense of exclusivity, of chosenness, that his upbringing and later his abortive training as a priest taught him and which is shared by dedicated believers of the three great monotheisms. This explains his position on two dominant strands of contemporary Indian thought: he feels equally distant from "a secularism which seems to respect no religion, and a nationalism which carries with it the danger of only respecting one". The view that "any cause that is not secular is illiberal, seems to be illiberal itself," he remarks (not surprisingly some of his critics in India have accused him of being a BJP sympathiser). The religiosity of Indians is clearly congenial to Tully's temperament (while in the west "Mammon is triumphant and God on the retreat"), as is the openness and syncretism of Hinduism, even if it has recently taken on a militant aspect.

For instance, in a beautiful essay called "Altered Altars" in his previous book, *India In Slow Motion*, Tully sets out

## Review

### *India's Unending Journey*

by Mark Tully

Rider &amp; Co, 288 pages, 2007

with his partner, Gillian Wright, (best known to Indian readers as the translator of Shrilal Shukla's comic novel Raag Darbari), to investigate Goan Christianity four decades after the departure of the proselytising Portuguese. Under the Portuguese, Goa "was the headquarters of the mission to convert the Orient, and was often described as the Rome of the East". But on his visit Tully finds churchgoing tinted with all kinds of borrowings from Hinduism; social life has managed to liberalise doctrine. Where representatives of the Vatican once promoted a spirit of exclusivity, priests are now preoccupied with the necessity of making their church "an Indian church". Tully attends different serv-

contrasts "our Western habit of seeing issues in black and white" with the Indian belief in balance and reconciliation. "If there is one thing I have learnt from India," he writes, reprising a hoary platitude, "it is to appreciate how little in life is totally black, or indeed, purely white."

This radically exaggerates the gap between Western and Indian civilization. "Balance" may be an avowed ideal in India but it is clearly not a reality, and the secular temper of the West that Tully criticises often facilitates a reasoned discussion of issues without the shrillness, misplaced sense of superiority, and contempt for the rule of law that often marks the contribution of aggressively religious organisations or people

to Indian debates. It is hard to resist the suspicion that it is Tully's impatience with

## Tully has a more sophisticated sense of India and its past than many Indians; but this book waters down a perspective of Indian life strongly made in his earlier works

ices around the state, and reports on the particularities of each one. Among the ways in which worship has taken on an Indian face, he notes, is in the relationship between believers and God. While the Portuguese had wanted to impress the Indians with the awesome majesty of "a God who lived on high", now typically the priest "became one with his parishioners worshipping a personal God, more a friend than a king". Tully confesses he is uncomfortable with these altered altars—"I came from the old tradition...I found it easier to worship God in majesty, rather than God the social worker who battles for the poor, or God the personal pal of the charismatics."

But everywhere in this essay and others in the book—on the history of the Sufi faith, on farmers' problems in Karnataka, on cyber-governance in Hyderabad, on the reinvention of Rama by the BJP—there is evidence of Tully's talent for what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "thick description". Although the title *India In Slow Motion* is primarily a reference to the "peculiarly Indian form of bad governance" that has immiserated Indian people and retarded economic growth, it might also be understood as a metaphor for the writer's painstaking methods.

Tully's warming belief in his adopted country, or more precisely the best of what it has to offer, leads him to overestimate India. For instance, in *India's Unending Journey* he

the West that makes him overturn the dominant paradigm. For even if Tully has learnt to appreciate from India how little in life is purely black or white, it can safely be said that there are millions of Indians who themselves show no sign of having learnt this from their country, and whose faith, whose sense of their history, and whose attitudes towards their wider society constrict rather than enlarge their lives—which is the emphasis, for example, of VS Naipaul, the titles of whose works on India or Indian characters include the words "area of darkness", "wounded", and "half a life". Reading Tully, conversely, one might feel it is Western civilisation that has become an area of darkness.

We end, then, with two paradoxes. One is that Tully, by dint of his decades of travel and exceptional learning, has a more sophisticated sense of India and its past than many Indians, who cleave to exclusive and partial views of it. But two: because of its insistence on distilling the meanings of Indian civilisation into simple assertions that don't hold up for very long, *India's Unending Journey* actually waters down a perspective on Indian life that is strongly made, even if never explicitly stated, by Tully's other distinguished books.

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